



Coast Guard HR Flag Voice 85

BUILDING A HOUSE FOR DIVERSITY PART 1

This is the first of a two part Flag Voice. It is based on the book "Building a House for Diversity," by R. Roosevelt Thomas, Jr., one of the world's leading experts on diversity management. The book's subtitle is "How a fable about a giraffe and an elephant offers new strategies for today's workforce." I'll begin by retelling the fable.

The Giraffe and the Elephant

In a small suburban community, a giraffe had a new home built to his family's specifications. It was a wonderful house for giraffes, with soaring ceilings and tall doorways. High windows ensured maximum light and good views while protecting the family's privacy. Narrow hallways saved valuable space without compromising convenience. So well done was the house that it won the National Giraffe Home of the Year Award. The home's owners were understandably proud.

One day the giraffe, working in his state-of-the-art wood shop in the basement, happened to look out the window. Coming down the street was an elephant. "I know him," he thought. "We worked together on a PTA committee. He's an excellent woodworker too. I think I'll ask him in to see my new shop. Maybe we can even work on some projects." So the giraffe reached his head out the window and invited the elephant in.

The elephant was delighted; he had liked working with the giraffe and looked forward to knowing him better. Besides, he knew about the wood shop and wanted to see it. So he walked up to the basement door and waited for it to open.

"Come in; come in," the giraffe said. But immediately they encountered a problem. While the elephant could get his head in the door, he could go no farther.

"It's a good thing we made this door expandable to accommodate my wood shop equipment," the giraffe

said. "Give me a minute while I take care of our problem." He removed some bolts and panels to let the elephant in.

The two acquaintances were happily exchanging woodworking stories when the giraffe's wife leaned her head down the basement stairs and called her husband: "Telephone, dear; it's your boss."

"I'd better take that upstairs in the den," the giraffe told the elephant. "Please make yourself at home; this may take a while."

The elephant looked around, saw a half-finished project on the lathe table in the far corner, and decided to explore it further. As he moved through the doorway that led to the area of the shop, however, he heard an ominous scrunch. He backed out, scratching his head. "Maybe I'll join the giraffe upstairs," he thought. But as he started up the stairs, he heard them to begin to crack. He jumped off and fell back against the wall. It too began to crumble. As he sat there disheveled and dismayed, the giraffe came down the stairs.

"What on earth is happening here?" the giraffe asked in amazement.

I was trying to make myself at home," the elephant said.

The giraffe looked around. "Okay, I see the problem. The doorway is too narrow. We'll have to make you smaller. There's an aerobics studio near here. If you'd take some classes there, we could get you down to size."

"Maybe," the elephant said, looking unconvinced.

"And the stairs are too weak to carry your weight," the giraffe continued. "If you took a ballet class at night, I'm sure we could get you light on your feet. I really hope you'll do it. I like having you here."

"Perhaps," the elephant said. "But to tell you the truth, I'm not sure a house designed for a giraffe will ever really work for an elephant, not unless there are some major changes."

This story has much to teach us. First, the true meaning of diversity.

The elephant & giraffe represent a diversity mixture. A diversity mixture is any combination of individuals who are different in some ways, yet similar in others.

This critical concept challenges us to abandon our accustomed ways of thinking about diversity, where the organization has "main" people and then the "others," or those who are "different" in some way (usually race or gender). In this "traditional view," it is the "others" who constitute diversity. In this fable we begin to see diversity as the total collective mixture, a mixture made up of more than the "main" ones & the "others." We begin to understand that diversity is not just a function of race & gender or any other

"us" vs. "them" combination, but rather a complex and ever-changing blend of attributes, behaviors & talents.

The giraffe & elephant form a diversity mixture. This mixture is similar in important ways. They both live in the same neighborhood, and share several interests such as woodworking and the PTA. But they are also different in critical ways - size, weight, & shape - but they allow these differences to be their undoing.

The giraffe represents the "main" group - it's his house, his design, his rules - he's clearly in charge. Meanwhile, the elephant is the "other" group - he's warmly invited and genuinely welcome, but in the giraffe's home he is an outsider and always will be so in a house not built with elephants in mind.

Next week I'll continue with some of the lessons to be learned. Meanwhile, please read the fable over again carefully - there is much implied here for a complex, large organization such as the Coast Guard. I encourage you to discuss it with other members in your workplace. How would you handle this situation? From the giraffe's perspective? From the elephant's perspective? What parallels can you draw within your own command? Within our service?

Regards, FL Ames

Flag Voice 82 on Service Medical Records & VA Rating Decisions listed VA form 10-10EZ for application of Compensation and Pension from the Veterans Administration. This has caused some confusion. The form used for adjudication of compensation and benefits is VA form 21-526. Information on this program and form can be found at www.vba.va.gov/bln/21/compinfo.htm.

Form 10-10EZ is used by all eligible personnel to request medical benefits through the VA system. Criteria for eligibility under the Medical Benefits program can be found at www.va.gov/health/elig. All veterans benefits information can also be found on the web site listed in Flag Voice 82.

For those with other than SWSII, attached is a more complete explanation of VA forms use.

Regards, FL Ames

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